NETIQUETTE MATTERS

How you use e-mail can enhance or detract from your professional image. Here are some tips for looking good.

By Ken Wysocky

An estimated 147 million people use e-mail at work and at home almost every day. But a funny thing happened on the world's way to the information superhighway: It left etiquette standing by the side of the road.

This lack of so-called "netiquette" is no small matter. According to a survey of 416 companies conducted by the American Management Association and The ePolicy Institute, 26 percent of employers have fired employees for abusing e-mail. And studies show that e-mail abuse conservatively costs private- and public-sector employers in the United States millions of dollars a year in lost productivity, breaches in confidentiality and lawsuits.

It's almost as if e-mail's simplicity, speed, low cost and convenience make it an entity unto itself, immune to the rules and courtesies that apply to more conventional communications, such as old-fashioned phone calls and letters.

Fast and easy, but ...

"People think that because it's fast and easy, they don't have to pay as much attention to it," says Lydia Ramsey, a nationally known business etiquette guru. "It's as though we got it before we were able to figure out how to use it."

Ramsey should know. For the last 12 years, she's been a keen observer of professional etiquette, including e-mail use. She runs Manners That Sell, an etiquette consulting business in Savannah, Ga. She has appeared on the pages of the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal and has been heard on Paul Harvey and National Public Radio.

"You should remember that how you use e-mail represents yourself in the same way as how you dress, shake hands or talk on the telephone," Ramsey says. In that respect, using e-mail properly is a great way to impress others and build strong, positive professional relationships.

Even Ramsey isn't immune to the perils of e-mail. She recalls the time a friend forwarded an e-mail from a reader who criticized an article her friend had written. "She wanted to know my reaction to the reader's comments," Ramsey recalls. Ramset sent a reply that the woman was "wacky." However, she inadvertently copied the critical reader.

"And my friend and I are both business etiquette people," she chuckles ruefully.

Think before sending

That incident underscores a basic rule of e-mail: Think carefully about what you write. Because there's no face-to-face interaction with e-mail, it's easier to say things you'd never say in person. And once you send, there's no turning back.

"The natural response with e-mail is to respond quickly," Ramsey observes. "So there is little thought given to how the message will come across." The fact that an e-mail recipient can't see your facial expressions or body language or hear your tone of voice makes messages even more subject to misinterpretation.

"I have to watch myself with e-mail because I tend to be sarcastic," Ramsey notes. "When I talk, people can see my facial expressions. That's not true with e-mail.

People think they can hide behind their computer — say something angry without putting the gloves on. They feel safe. But eventually, the chickens come home to roost."

Ramsey urges people who use what are known as emoticons — punctuation marks that create things like smiles or frowns — to think twice. "If you feel the need to use an emoticon, you probably need to go back and rewrite what you wrote," she suggests.

By the same token, don't use e-mail to send inappropriate jokes, photos or cartoons while you're at work. At the very least, you may be embarrassed if the wrong person sees it. At worst, you may find yourself being disciplined, or even fired.

Remember grammar

"People don't realize how many people see e-mail," she warns. "If you want to share jokes or opinions that are not fit for public consumption, then do it at home. Again, if you have to think about whether or not to send something, don't do it."

Statistics back up the warning. Another AMA/ePolicy Institute survey shows that about 55 percent of 526 organizations polled review and retain employee e-mail.

Spelling and punctuation errors and bad grammar are two more cardinal sins of e-mail. Again, people think that e-mail's immediacy and informality diminish the need for the usual care, or for proofreading. That isn't the case, and shoddy e-mail messages can tarnish your professional image, Ramsey emphasizes.

"You should spell-check e-mail just like you do with a written document," Ramsey advises. "With e-mail, there's no second line of proofing. We just send it out like we leave a voice mail message. You have to go back and double and triple check."

Along with grammar, a proper salutation goes a long way toward setting the proper tone. Omitting even an informal greeting such as "Hi, Joe" or "Hello, Jane" can make your message sound cold and impersonal.

Toward efficiency

There are other specific things that can make your use of e-mail more efficient and effective, Ramsey notes.

Be subject-specific. The subject line in an e-mail is the main cue by which people prioritize responses. Be on point and succinct. "If a subject line reads "Just Checking In," there's a tendency for the recipient to put off viewing or answering," Ramsey says.

Less is more. If you send an e-mail that reads like *War and Peace,* people aren't going to read it. By its nature, e-mail demands brevity. "It's like a written sound bite," Ramsey says. "Say what you need to say and get out. If you absolutely need to say more, put it in an attachment."

Change the subject. Sometimes people just continually hit "Reply" when exchanging e-mails back and forth, even though the subject may change slightly each time. Changing the subject line accordingly will make it easier for the recipient to find an old message in a folder without opening up virtually every one you sent.

Don't forward without permission. Information too often gets passed on inappropriately, which is especially damaging if it's confidential. Carefully consider the impact of forwarding, and

as a general rule, if in doubt, don't do so unless you are asked to, or you obtain permission.

Use a signature. It's very helpful to e-mail recipients if you create an automatic signature that includes critical information such as your name, street address, phone number, fax number and the like.

There are few things more frustrating than receiving an "unsigned" e-mail with an address that uses a nickname or some made-up moniker instead of the sender's name, and the subject matter doesn't hint at who sent it. Aside from that, someone may want to speak with you rather than continue with back-and-forth e-mails, and they'll appreciate having contact information easily accessible.

A capital offense. Avoid typing in all capital letters. In e-mail parlance, this is known as "shouting," and it's very annoying.

Do "To" last. Don't fill in the e-mail address until you're absolutely sure you've checked your message for things such as spelling and punctuation, proper tone, and clarity. If you were going to send an attached file, check to be sure that it's attached. If the address is filled in first, all it takes is one accidental keystroke to send the message before you're ready to do so.

Don't get Ramsey wrong; she thinks e-mail is amazing. "It's a time-saver," she says. "It's cheap, because there are no postage costs. You don't interrupt people like you would with a phone call. You don't have to respond right away — you can check your e-mail and respond when it's convenient. And you can 'talk' back and forth long-distance without an expensive phone bill.

"But people need to understand that e-mail doesn't cover all situations. To try and develop a meaningful relationship with people, sometimes you need to pick up the phone or go out for lunch. E-mail isn't a good way to build a professional relationship." ✦